

THE DEVELOPMENT OF THEORETICAL APPROACHES TO SEX WORK IN AUSTRALIAN SEX-WORKER RIGHTS GROUPS

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SEX-WORKER GROUPS IN AUSTRALIA WERE LARGELY FORMED AROUND ACTION oriented tasks. Groups of people came together over particular campaigns or issues; law reform being the most notable. People in groups that are action-orientated often have a disdain for theory and see it as baggage that gets in the way of the real tasks. In many cases, groups establish themselves claiming not to have relied heavily on theory. Sex-worker groups in Australia have, however, made many theoretical statements on prostitution, and these have developed over the course of the sex-worker rights movement. This paper is an attempt to document that theoretical development.

This focus has been chosen for two reasons: firstly, for sex-worker groups in Australia, this paper will contribute to the ongoing discussion around various theoretical understandings of sex work; and secondly, because of the influence that different theoretical understandings of sex work can have on the development of public policy around the sex industry.

This paper is not going to be a history of sex-worker groups in Australia, although some of that information will be necessary as background to the main points raised. Largely, this paper will be a discussion of the direction that sex-worker groups have taken in the late 1980s and early 1990s. This will include a brief discussion of programs and action undertaken by these groups. However, this discussion will focus on these actions in relation to the development of a unique theoretical approach to sex work.

When speaking of an 'unique theoretical approach' it is not inferred that Australian sex-worker groups have come up with an entirely new theory. What is unique in Australia though, is the way Australian sex-worker groups have not become bogged down in dogma, but have looked to and adapted from sex-worker groups of all ideological persuasions from all over the world. This has included the merging of approaches that, in other countries,

could well be seen as mutually exclusive. Since the first sex-worker groups formed in Australia, there has been a search for theory; for a philosophy that would support the aims which the groups had set for themselves.

The Impact of Overseas Sex-Worker Groups on the Australian Sex Workers' Movement

The prostitutes' strike in France in 1975—as interpreted by the English Collective of Prostitutes (ECP)—became the first source of a theory that was seen as an acceptable explanation of prostitution. The ECP theory can be summarised by their slogan, 'for prostitutes, against prostitution'. They argued that prostitution existed because of the economic inequality of the sexes. If women had better economic circumstances, which was later narrowed into 'wages for housework', then there would be no need for women to engage in prostitution; and they further exhorted that no-one would. This won over many feminists and other allies who wanted to demonstrate exploitation to fit in with the largely Marxist-Feminist position that was dominant at the time.

This theory of prostitution, in retrospect, can be seen as the type of apologist position that many oppressed groups have taken in the first public airing of their cause. The gay movement started pre-Stonewall, in the same way, saying that it was not their fault they were different and that they just wanted to be accepted.

The shift from this position in the gay community—through the gay rights movement of the early 1970s to the assimilationist overtones of the 1980s—has parallels in the sex-worker rights movement. Similarly, parallels with the latest developments in gay political action and theory—such as those espoused by groups such as Queer Nation and OutRage—can also be seen in theory around sex work.

Most sex-worker groups in the USA and Canada in the 1980s developed along two tangents which are now converging. In Australia these two developments have occurred simultaneously, but in modified forms. First was the move towards consideration of prostitution as sex work. The notion that within 'prostitution' there were people doing a job—offering sex for a fee—was truly unique. No longer were there any apologist overtones. Stemming from this was the notion that some people actually chose prostitution as a job option: a statement which incidentally is still being howled down across the globe. Sex workers who say that they freely chose prostitution as a job option—and furthermore that they enjoy it, or do not hate and feel degraded by it—are told by many feminists and moralists from across the political spectrum, that:

- they do not enjoy prostitution; they are just saying they do to conceal the emotional damage that has occurred to them in prostitution; or,
- that they are only convinced that they like prostitution because it is in the interests of men for them to like it.

Such responses to prostitution actually show an anti-sex/sexual-difference position that has been taken by many 'progressive' groups towards sex work in particular and sex itself generally.

This leads the discussion into the second approach that developed in the USA and Canada in the late 1980s: seeing sex work as an expression of sexuality—an expression which in itself is good. This position further posits that sex work, like other expressions of sexuality that deviate from the norm, will be oppressed, and sex workers will be discriminated against. This oppression and discrimination includes laws criminalising sex

work, the extreme levels of violence directed at sex workers which are tolerated by society, and the stigmatisation of sex workers as unclean and 'unchaste' (Pheterson 1987, p. 215).

This position allowed sex-worker groups to look for allies amongst other groups of people who were stigmatised because of their sexuality and sexual expression. Sex-worker rights groups operating from this theoretical basis are often seen as part of a broad 'pro-sex' movement, which includes promotion of sexual minorities and action against censorship.

In the USA, both the 'work' grouping and the ECP affiliated groups took up this approach, often in response to attacks directed at sex workers from the emerging anti-porn movement. Thus a new separation between these two camps came into being: the pro-sex sex worker, and the pro-sex woman who was forced into prostitution by not being paid for housework, but 'isn't going to take any . . . now that she is a worker'.

There is a third camp in prostitutes groups in the USA called WHISPER (Women Hurt in Systems of Prostitution Engaged in Revolt). This group has no direct parallel in Australia, although views similar to theirs are sometimes aired by feminists in relation to sex work, both within sex-worker groups and outside of them. This group was firmly aligned with anti-porn feminists, and claimed that prostitution (they refused to refer to prostitution as sex work) was an institutionalised form of male violence directed against all women.

In response to other sex-worker groups in the USA, WHISPER often states that working in the sex industry is so damaging that sex workers who say they are not damaged are simply internalising that damage; or that they are brainwashed by the patriarchy into believing that sex work is good, because it suits men that way.

This approach, which sees women as victims of a violent male sexuality, actually suffers from a slippage of ideas around the issue of consent. Upholders of this position fail to differentiate sexual acts along lines of whether they are consensual or not, and sex work—in the nature of the contract between sex worker and client—is a consensual act. Anti-porn feminists try to move prostitution into the non-consensual category because they do not like the fact that people do consent to it. This is a case in point of the type of 'pornographic reductionism' that has become the trademark of this type of 'feminism'.

It is from this position that proposals such as arresting and charging the clients of sex workers, rather than removing laws against sex workers, emerge. However, the question is never asked what will happen to the sex worker who is then broke and is being harassed and arrested by the police.

Theoretical Development within Australian Sex-Worker Groups

Within Australia, sex-worker groups have gone through different stages of development. Influences and events are not arranged in chronological order in the following discussion as ordering the influence of ideas and events is not a particularly easy task.

Sex-worker groups in Australia have not taken on one theory outright and then rejected it in favour of a different theory. Instead, a combination of influences from sex-worker groups outside Australia, developments within sex-worker groups, the effects of changing political climates and, of course, the HIV epidemic have all had their impact on the approach to sex work that is being developed by Australian sex-worker groups.

The first prostitute groups in Australia, in the late 1970s and early 1980s, were formed around specific issues, the main issues being: stopping police harassment and corruption, and decriminalising prostitution. The greatest successes of the original Scarlet Alliance (South Australia) and the Prostitutes' Action Group (Victoria) were: getting law reform on the agenda; and bringing sex work and sex workers 'out from behind the red light'.

The desire for law reform and an end to illegality again formed the impetus for the reformation of sex-worker groups in the mid-1980s. The Australian Prostitutes Collective—which formed in Melbourne, Sydney and the Gold Coast—was originally

affiliated with the English Collective of Prostitutes (ECP) and accepted the explanation of prostitution as a reflection of economic circumstances. This was understandable, and possibly necessary at the time, as the aim of the newly formed groups was to act as support networks for sex workers and attract social welfare funding. This line was also easier for new spokeswomen to support in public as it narrowed down the issues that were open for discussion. It is also sometimes helpful to have an explanation that is full of holes as a starting point, in order to avoid the theory becoming dogma.

The ECP was also one of the few prostitutes groups known to anyone in Australia at the time. The sex-worker movement is still limited by the lack of credible home-grown published work upon which to base its approach to sex work and sex-workers' rights.

In encouraging people who had problems in the industry to come to the group, many of the positive aspects of sex work were not highlighted. One of the results of this 'economic approach' to prostitution, in the setting up of a group hoping to attract welfare funding, is the maintenance of a public perception that prostitution is a problem. Spokespersons from the groups were always saying what was wrong with sex work, and the organisation's time and resources went to dealing with problems related to prostitution. The negative emphasis continued when HIV/AIDS funding became available, and this emphasis has become entrenched in the service side of most sex-worker groups, persisting after ideology around sex work has moved on.

This negative approach fails to give recognition to what people in the industry actually like about working, both by emphasising that there is only one reason why people take up sex work (for money) and emphasising the 'bad' things about sex work. The other factor in the ideological shift away from 'problematisation' was an increase in the numbers of sex workers involved in groups. Most sex-worker groups had started as groupings of sex workers and their supporters.

The inclusion of a work approach to prostitution became obvious within the groups around 1987. With law reform in NSW and partial law reform in Victoria, it became increasingly evident that what sex workers wanted from their groups was to project an image that would itself promote the legitimacy of their position as sex workers, rather than simply explain away why they were working in the industry and thereby assume that they would all leave if they had any other possible way of earning a living. Initially, using the term 'sex worker' was seen as a way of avoiding the stigmatised and value laden term of 'prostitute'. Sex worker was a term which pulled no punches.

After the first round of law reform proposals in the mid-1980s, occupational health and safety issues became a central focus. Law reform, however, was still the basis of any real solution to all the issues in prostitution that are created by criminalisation. It became apparent that the type of law reform that most jurisdictions were likely to adopt could create new major problems with regard to working conditions and control of workplaces.

Thus, within most groups a stream of thought and action developed around industrial issues, but within the context of still providing services to, or advocacy for, those people who were having difficulty in sex work, or with other parts of their lives relating to sex work.

Cheryl Overs (1991), in her report for the Scarlet Alliance on issues for HIV positive sex workers, has differentiated between sex work and prostitution in the following way:

Consciously commercial sex which takes place in a workplace, regardless of how informal, is more accurately described as sex work (as distinct from prostitution). Those transactions can be recognised as a series of interrelated workplaces which form the commercial sex industry and which can be targeted for promotion and/or enforcement of sound work practices.

Prostitution outside the sex industry can be thought about in different ways. It is distinguished from other private sex acts by moral considerations about the

impropriety of sex which is motivated by needs of the parties which fall outside of notions about love or even mutual respect and desire.

So whilst sex work was first used to remove moral connotations associated with the word 'prostitute', it was also an attempt to define the sex industry and its workers so as to form boundaries for programs of sex-worker groups. This demarcation within the category of prostitute was necessary, especially for the HIV programs which were developed for the sex industry.

AIDS brought a new focus of occupational health and safety issues into sex-worker groups. Funded programs for education focussed on the health of sex workers and the protection of sex workers from sexually transmitted diseases which they could be exposed to during the course of their work.

As sex-worker groups became more involved in HIV and industrial issues, the potential for AIDS to be used as a 'public health' reason to control the sex lives of sexual minorities became apparent. Current threats to the rights of prostitutes arise from AIDS related stigmatisation and associated ignorance and fear.

Ties with sex-worker groups working with AIDS in other countries, and with other AIDS groups here and abroad, have lead to a greater awareness of sexuality issues in Australian sex-worker groups. It has also opened our eyes to the way the right, notably in the USA and in Britain, has seized AIDS as a new reason for restricting the rights of people whose sexuality falls outside the accepted norm.

It is from this point that the current interest in 'new' sexual politics has emerged. Seeing sex workers as a sexual minority among other sexual minorities has the obvious potential for networking around common issues. The very idea of being a 'minority' (sexual or otherwise) also opens up many other political and ideological possibilities. Some of these are being incorporated into sex-worker groups and programs at present—the most notable being the concept of 'self-determination'. Applied to sex-worker groups, this is the recognition that the agenda for sex-worker groups should be determined by sex workers. This idea within HIV education is apparent in the concept of 'peer education'.

As an issue, HIV ties together many of the issues that sex-worker groups in the past have been working on. In Australia, the push to remove 'legislative impediments to HIV prevention' has resulted in law reform being placed back on the agenda in some states and territories. However, as well as the possibility of legislating to make HIV prevention easier, sex-worker groups are having to contend with a conservative push to legislate against people with HIV or groups perceived to be at risk. These conservative pressure groups are using 'the public health' as their new bandwagon. (This push comes largely from established conservative pressure groups in Australia, and is championed by people such as Dr Bruce Shepherd, President of the Australian Medical Association (AMA), among others.)

An understanding of sexuality issues—and the concept of sex workers as a sexual minority, amongst other sexual minorities—is a powerful base from which to work towards fending off these attacks. It also provides a base for proactive work to destigmatise sex work, as part of a broader movement aimed at destigmatising sex and sexuality.

From this theoretical position, government controls on sex work and sex workers are part of a broader issue of the state attempting to set moral limits by criminalising certain consensual sexual acts. Sex workers are discriminated against in a similar way to other people who do not fit into the narrow, accepted sex roles tolerated in our society.

Luckily, in Australia we have not had to contend with anti-porn, anti-sex feminists teaming up with such unlikely allies as the AMA and conservative Christians to limit the rights of sex workers. However, our strong links with groups and individuals in the USA and Canada have brought to our attention many of the issues that the debates around pornography have raised in those countries. A recognition of these issues, and our

involvement in HIV/AIDS, has seen the development of new and potentially powerful alliances.

In Australia, we have looked at sex work from many different standpoints while not being dogmatically tied down to any of them. The incorporation of inspiration from many theoretical approaches to sex work forms a good base for sex-worker groups to look at the varying issues around sex work in the 1990s.

In trying to summarise the theoretical base from which sex-worker groups are now operating, it should be noted that groups within Australia are independent, and different people have preferences for differing explanations of issues.

In Australia we have been exposed to many different theories about sex work. Groups have tended to take what is useful and discard that with which they disagree. Importantly, we have used our own local experience to try to mould together a theoretical approach that is relevant to the changes our groups are striving to achieve in the sex industry, in policy and the law, and in attitudes towards sex workers. This has been easy in Australia, as there has not been the group ownership of theories which has led to conflict in the sex-worker movement in other countries.

The continuing development of the theory and social movement around HIV and sex/sexuality issues will hopefully prove to have a large impact upon the rights of sex workers and other sexual minorities. This—combined with a concerted push for the recognition of sex work as work and sex workers as workers—will hopefully lead to a strong and dynamic sex-worker movement that is able to deal consistently with the many issues currently confronting sex workers and the sex industry.

References

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